What Makes Henry Tick?

Private, Persistent and Powerful, Rep. Waxman Was Networking Long Before the Strategy Became Chic

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By Josh Getlinr

A long time ago, when John F. Kennedy was still President, Henry Waxman and his college buddies used to play cards on the lawn at UCLA. They'd cut classes and catch some rays, dealing endless hands of poker and hearts.

It was the spring of 1961 and none of his friends dreamed that Waxman, the quiet son of a grocer, would one day be a liberal powerhouse in the U.S. Congress. Few of them could have guessed that Henry, at 5-foot-4, would become a giant in the world of political fundraising.

But maybe it was there for all to see. Burt Prelutsky, a friend who lost his shirt in some of those card games, believes they told the whole story. "If you want to know the truth, Henry was lousy at poker but brilliant at hearts," he says. "In poker, you have to be a bully, you have to do a lot of posturing and bluffing to drive up the pot, and Henry couldn't do that. "But in hearts, you have to be more cautious. You plan a strategy and work with people, even your enemies, to get something accomplished and win the game. Very much, I would think, like trying to pass a clean-air bill."

It's a brisk March day in Washington, and as he swivels behind his desk, Henry Arnold Waxman looks more like a movie mogul than a member of Congress. Short, balding and mustachioed, he works the phones smoothly, like a Hollywood agent booking high-priced talent.

"Can we get Streisand?" he asks one caller. "I think I can reach Norman Lear if we want to," he tells another.

"What about Meryl Streep? Try to get her on the phone. Maybe we could get her on board, too."

Minutes later, phone calls come back from the West Coast: Barbra Streisand is working on a movie somewhere and Lear is away on business. Streep cannot be located. The West Los Angeles Democrat looks momentarily deflated.

"Geez," he says with a sigh. "Everybody is on location."

Quietly, behind the scenes, Waxman is calling in chits, trying to line up celebrity names on a letter urging the U.S. Senate to pass a stronger version of the Clean Air Act. By day's end, he will get Lear, 20th Century Fox Chairman Barry Ditiek and cable TV magnate Mark Nathanson to sign the message. In a nutshell, Waxman wants the Senate to back an amendment requiring greater use and production of alternative fuels. It's a political long shot, because President Bush and Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell are supporting a bill with weaker regulations.

But the man whose district includes some of the nation's biggest television and movie studios has a plan. For years, senators have been coming out to California, hat in hand, seeking cash contributions from the entertainment industry. Now, he says, it's time for Hollywood donors to call in a favor--a key vote for tougher anti-pollution laws. The celebrity letters will target senators who are wavering and whose votes could make the difference, Waxman explains. They'll be hand-delivered the weekend before the showdown vote, which is expected to be close.

Like so many Waxman strategies, it seems obvious in retrospect and it unfolds behind closed doors. When the Senate debate begins, most of the media attention will focus on California Sen. Pete Wilson and Colorado Sen. Tim Wirth, official sponsors of the amendment. Although Waxman helped orchestrate the strategy, an unusual involvement for a House member in a Senate matter, his fingerprints will be hard to find.

One week later, the amendment loses in the Senate by a narrow margin. But Waxman has had too many victories in his career to view it as anything more than a skirmish. Hours later, he's back on the phone, vowing to pass a similar anti-pollution measure in the House next month. In the following weeks, he helps negotiate breakthrough agreements on other clean-air controversies with auto industry lobbyists, paving the way for passage of the legislation. It's all remarkably low-key. Unlike many of his colleagues, Waxman, 50, shuns the spotlight. Yet his influence on Capitol Hill is profound. In less than 16 years, he has become one of the most prominent members of the House, a leader on environmental issues and a key player on virtually all health legislation. An unyielding liberal, he is considered the point man in Congress on AIDS policy and has long been a staunch supporter of Israel. Even his worst enemies give him credit for consistency.

"We have profound differences and yet I admire him," says Rep. William Dannemeyer (R-Fullerton), who has bitterly opposed Waxman's successful efforts to increase federal funding for AIDS treatment and research. "I always know where he is. He's a liberal in California and a liberal in Washington. He doesn't try to fool anybody." Although Waxman is not a member of the leadership and does not chair a full committee, he runs the powerful health and environment subcommittee of the Energy and Commerce Committee, a job that keeps him in the thick of crucial policy debates. Critics acknowledge that he has a grasp of issues second to none.

They also marvel at his ability to promote liberal policies during the Reagan and Bush eras. Through sheer gumption and mastery of the legislative process, Waxman expanded medical care programs for poor women and children in the early 1980's and defended clean-air regulations against White House efforts to weaken them.

"Henry is one of the most impressive players in Congress in the uses and understanding of power I've ever seen," says Alan Ehrenhalt, a former political editor of Congressional Quarterly.

"He's interested in publicizing causes, but he's not all that interested in personal credit. He wears you down with persistence."

He's also an enigma. At first glance, it's hard to figure how Waxman holds on to power in an age of sound bites, pretty faces and hardball politics. Sometimes painfully shy, he dresses conservatively, drives a small Toyota and rarely hits the Washington cocktail circuit. The veteran lawmaker spends most of his free time with his wife, Janet, and son, Michael, in a comfortable Bethesda, Md. home. When he visits his Los Angeles district, which includes Beverly-Fairfax, Hollywood, Hancock Park, parts of the San Fernando Valley and West Hollywood, he usually stays with his 77-year-old father.

Waxman is not a dynamic speaker and rarely displays emotions in public. Critics and friends alike say he is too cautious in choosing his battles and has a puzzling reluctance to go for the jugular. Larry Kramer, a New York author and AIDS activist, praises the congressman for his pioneering work in calling attention to the disease, but says: "I wish Waxman had more charisma and I wish he were willing to work publicly more often. I have pleaded for Henry to convene what I'd call an (Estes) Kefauver-type hearing on the AIDS epidemic. . . . What he doesn't have is that golden tongue.

"Congress has no shortage of rising stars who cram their weekends with junkets and fund-raisers, but Waxman is not one of them. A devout conservative Jew, he observes the entire Sabbath and is generally unavailable to his staff from sundown Friday until Saturday night. Although he works out on a treadmill in the House gym, he is not athletic and these days has a small paunch. Jokes about his girth yield a

sheepish smile, but it takes a while for visitors to get beyond his aloof demeanor. He has a wry sense of humor, but is greatly concerned about how it will be perceived by the media and public.

Asked about his father's health, for example, Waxman tells an amusing story showing that his dad would do anything to promote his son's career. Then he asks nervously that the anecdote not be used. Questioned about his draft status during the Vietnam War (Waxman had a student deferment), he fires off a line from a Woody Allen movie, then insists that the joke be off the record.

"This is not a guy who comes home at night, kicks off his shoes and plays rock 'n' roll," says Los Angeles City Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky, a close ally. "There's no public versus private persona here. He talks about his kids the same way he talks about clean air."

How did it happen? How did a guy who was good at hearts but lousy at poker reach one of the top rungs of congressional power?

"I think you've got to be persistent, to accept defeat but keep coming back until you win," says Waxman, trying to explain his methods. "If you can't do that, you won't be happy around here. Persistence. That's the key."

Money is another. Blessed with an affluent district and a genius for fund raising, he presides over one of the nation's most unique political networks, the Waxman-Berman machine. Its tentacles reach from Los Angeles City Hall and greater Southern California to Sacramento and Capitol Hill. Along with Rep. Howard Berman (D-Panorama City), a longtime friend, Waxman has built a homegrown empire unrivaled in Congress. The group raises millions of dollars in contributions from well-heeled donors and uses its political clout to help elect allies at all levels of government. Members in good standing include Rep. Mel Levine (D-Santa Monica), Rep. Julian Dixon (D-Los Angeles), California Assemblyman Burt Margolin (D-Los Angeles), Yaroslavsky and others. While they do not dispense patronage in the usual sense, the politicians are linked by a common liberal agenda and the ability to raise vast sums of money through computerized mailings.

Like other congressional power brokers, Waxman distributes money from a political action fund to friendly candidates across the nation. But we're not talking chump change: From 1987 to '89, he gave $258,000 to his colleagues, more than any other House member, according to Common Cause.

"I don't see any clear line between the political process and the legislative process," Waxman says. "The legislative process depends on who is elected to office. . . . There are many little things that you hope will pay off in terms of getting good people in the right place to do the right thing at the right time."

To be sure, the Waxman-Berman machine has had its setbacks. It was embarrassed in 1988 when a racially tinged memo produced by its political consulting firm became public and cast a shadow over Yaroslavsky's bid to unseat Mayor Tom Bradley. Earlier, the group lost expensive battles against California GOP Congressmen Robert K. Dornan (R-Garden Grove) and Robert J. Lagomarsino (R-Ojai). But there have been more victories than defeats. Although his name periodically surfaces as a candidate for higher office, Waxman says he is content to build on the political influence he already has.

"Most members of Congress don't have this kind of leverage, and that's what makes Henry different," says a California political consultant. "Why should he give up his seat? He's sitting pretty right now."

Lou and Esther Waxman never thought of themselves as poor, but they lived over a grocery store near Watts during the years they raised Henry and his sister, Miriam. Both parents were staunch Democrats and took a keen interest in politics. Waxman's mother, who died two years ago, encouraged him to wear an Adlai Stevenson button to school, even though teachers made him remove it. A bright teenager, Henry won election to several student body posts at Fremont High School. His neighborhood at 80th Street and Avalon Boulevard was changing, but in the 1950s it was still ethnically mixed. Looking back, Waxman

says he was heavily influenced by his grandparents, who immigrated from Russia after the turn of the century. They had lived in the city of Kishinev but were forced to leave in 1905 after a bloody pogrom. Fleeing czarist persecution, they first came to Canada and later settled in the Boyle Heights section of Los Angeles.

"My grandparents would tell me about how the anti-Semites would come into town and destroy property, beat people up, threaten their lives, and they just felt they could no longer stay," he says. "They were younger people and could just pick up and leave . . . but they suffered."

By 1961 the Waxmans had moved to Beverly-Fairfax and Henry enrolled at UCLA. He had a strong interest in politics, fueled by the civil rights movement, and got involved in the California Young Democrats, a network of clubs that debated issues and lobbied for influence in party circles. Waxman was eventually elected statewide president and made key friends along the way, including fellow UCLA student Howard Berman and other young Democrats who would later hold office, such as Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, Congressman John Burton of San Francisco, and state Sen. David Roberti (D - Los Angeles).

"I first met Henry back In 1960 at a UCLA Young Democrats meeting, and he was running for vice president against someone else," Berman remembers. "I saw this short guy, and I decided to vote for his opponent. So I want it noted that my first act in politics was voting against Henry Waxman." Berman recalls Waxman as thoughtful and tenacious, but also capable of unleashing sarcastic one-liners. Prelutsky remembers him as someone who loved to argue politics but never took himself that seriously.

"He still is very funny," says his longtime friend, now a Los Angeles screenwriter. "But you saw a lot more of it back then, before he became an elected official." As his political savvy grew, Waxman was learning more painful lessons closer to home. His grandmother became ill and the family had difficulty caring for her. It was several years before the Medicare program became law, and his parents seemed overwhelmed by the responsibility.

"Everyone was so apprehensive whether we could pay for her medical bills and she ended up going to a nursing home, because we couldn't care for her any longer," he says. "It made me very sensitive to the difficulties of a lot of elderly people." By 1968, Waxman had graduated from UCLA Law School and was interested in running for office. He and his friends found a target in Lester McMillan, a veteran assemblyman who seemed to be losing touch with voters. The district included Beverly-Fairfax, West Adams, Culver City and Venice.

Waxman entered the race as an outsider, challenging not only an incumbent but his own family. Years before, his uncle Al had begun publishing a string of neighborhood newspapers throughout Los Angeles, and the Waxman name commanded influence in local politics. Because of the family's longtime support for McMillan, however, the paper did not endorse Henry. The race cost less than $30,000, but it had all the earmarks of what would later be a standard Waxman operation. Aided by Berman and Howard Blinson, another friend, the 29-year-old candidate pioneered the use of differentiated political mailings. Seniors would get one letter from Waxman addressing their concerns, while middle-class homeowners in Culver City got another. The practice is widespread now, but at the time it was considered novel.

In a 1968 article about that campaign, Prelutsky, then a Los Angeles Times columnist, poked fun at his friend. He also described a young candidate's political baptism on the streets of Beverly-Fairfax. During one encounter, for example, Waxman handed a piece of campaign literature to an elderly woman who took a look at his photo, then a look at him, and pointedly observed, "A very complimentary picture."

Waxman trounced McMillan with 64% of the vote and moved to Sacramento. Shortly thereafter, he married the former Janet Kessler, who had a daughter, Carol, from a previous marriage. The couple later had a second child, Michael. Molded by his own experiences, Waxman became a leading advocate for

the elderly and an expert on health care issues. In time, he helped Berman get elected to the assembly from another district, and the machine was born.

Democratic state leaders recognized Waxman's shrewd political instincts and made him chairman of a panel charged with drawing up new district lines for the 197O census. Later, he became chairman of the assembly Health Committee and helped pass legislation creating standards for health maintenance organizations in California. He took a keen Interest in federal health Issues and in 1074 won election to a new, court-ordered U.S. congressional district.

"I arrived in Washington as part of a new class of freshmen who wanted a more activist government," Waxman says. "We were determined to reform this institution . . . not to have power in the hands of a few old-timers."

The young congressman raised eyebrows five years later when he beat out a colleague with more seniority for the chairmanship of the health and environment subcommittee. Waxman says he won the coveted post by lobbying committee members for support, but it didn't hurt that he also gave money to their reelection campaigns. It was the first time such hardball tactics had been used to win a House subcommittee post.

"People were appalled," says Larry Sabato, a congressional observer and a professor of government at the University of Virginia. "He received a lot of criticism but now it's standard operating procedure. It showed and demonstrated his innovativeness."

Since then, Waxman has blended strong liberal views with an insider's appreciation of how the game is played on Capitol Hill. No longer the young Turk, he now says it is unhealthy for House members to mount freewheeling challenges to the House seniority system.

During the last 10 years, Waxman has blasted the automobile and oil lobbies backing Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.), the powerful chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee. Yet, on several occasions, he has also allied himself with special interest groups. Last year, it was learned that he and other California congressmen urged the Securities and Exchange Commission to drop a requirement forcing Drexel Burnham Lambert Inc. to move its high-yield junk bond office from Beverly Hills to the firm's New York headquarters. Earlier, he had received a $5,000 honorarium from the company, which is liquidating. Waxman says he was concerned about the economic loss to Southern California and in no way endorsed the company's now-controversial business dealings. The congressman also notes that he gave the $5,000 check to charity, because he had by then exceeded the annual congressional limit for such gifts.

On other issues, however, Waxman's advocacy has been clearcut.

Long before Congress became aware of acquired immune deficiency syndrome, he was holding hearings in Los Angeles and other cities to focus attention on the disease. Last year, he engineered passage of the first comprehensive AIDS bill, which contained millions of dollars for education, treatment and testing. Asked why, Waxman speculates that his Jewish background and the memory of his family's oppression may have fueled the fire. He and his staff have spent hours counseling AIDS advocates about the often byzantine process by which Congress allocates money.

"We needed him to show us the ropes," says Jeff Levi, formerly executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "Henry has a visceral understanding of the concerns of an oppressed minority."

He also represents a district with a large number of gays, and Waxman insists that he has the same duty to advance their interests as would a Midwestern congressman representing steel or auto workers. In March, during a health and environment subcommittee hearing, Dannemeyer tried to scuttle a Waxman proposal extending antidiscrimination protections to people with AIDS. He suggested that many of these individuals brought the disease on themselves and did not deserve special treatment. The normally calm

Waxman grabbed a microphone and snapped that anyone making such an argument was speaking like a "supreme being." As the packed hearing room erupted in applause, he concluded angrily: "I don't see any supreme beings on this committee."

The next day, Washington insiders were still clucking over the exchange. But Waxman had moved on to other issues. He spoke before the National Commission on AIDS about expanding the availability of AZT and other early intervention drugs. He also outlined plans to provide better care for the 37 million Americans who have no health insurance.

It may be years before any of these measures become law, but to Waxman that's familiar terrain. For him, the legislative process is one step at a time. You judge the odds, decide who's on your side and wait to see what happens.

Does that sound like a certain card game? Waxman flashes a surprised smile. "You mean hearts? Well, I guess I used to play that game a lot. I used to enjoy it. But these days, you know, I don't have time for cards anymore."